

## Flemish students' historical reference knowledge and narratives of the Belgian national past at the end of secondary education

Timo Van Havere, Kaat Wils, Fien Depaepe, Lieven Verschaffel and Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse\*  
*University of Leuven*

### Abstract

Since the early nineteenth century, western governments have expected history education to play a vital role in the formation of a national identity and the pursuit of national cohesion, by fostering shared knowledge and a shared (master)narrative of the national past. This article reports on a qualitative study that examines which narratives young adults construct about their national past, to what extent those narratives are underpinned by existing narrative templates, whether they reflect on the fact that the national past can be narrated in different ways, and to what extent they share a common reference knowledge. The study addresses the Flemish region of Belgium, a case characterized by a specific context of a nation state in decline, wherein diverse and often conflicting historical narratives coexist in popular historical culture and where the national past is almost absent from history education. A total of 107 first-year undergraduate history students were asked to write an essay on how they saw the national past. The influence of both history education and popular historical culture was reflected in the reference knowledge as well as in the (absence of) templates that students used to build their essays. Templates were not critically deconstructed, although some students nevertheless were able to discern and criticize existing 'myths' in the national past.

**Keywords:** Belgian history; history education and popular culture; narratives and narrative templates; reference knowledge; critical deconstruction of historical accounts

### Introduction

Since the early nineteenth century, many western governments have had high hopes for history education. History was (and is) expected to play a vital role in the formation of a national identity and the pursuit of national cohesion, by fostering a shared knowledge and a shared (master) narrative of the national past (Carretero *et al.*, 2012; Grever and Ribbens, 2007). In Belgium as well as in other European countries, governments have actively contributed to the construction of historical narratives about the national past. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Belgian nation state became a subject of controversy, especially in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. A Flemish subnation started to develop. As a result, new, subnational historical narratives arose. In popular historical culture nowadays, these old and newer, diverse and often conflicting historical narratives still coexist.

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\* Corresponding author – Email: [karel.vannieuwenhuyse@kuleuven.be](mailto:karel.vannieuwenhuyse@kuleuven.be)

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In Flemish history education, autonomously organized by the regional Flemish government since the federalization of Belgium from the 1960s onwards, no master narrative about the national or subnational past is instilled either. The history standards established by the Flemish government, which delineate the minimum targets that history education should meet, do not specify factual knowledge (Wils, 2009). They do not prescribe any fixed historical reference knowledge. They especially emphasize critical thinking skills and attitudes. The main frame of reference of the Flemish history standards is western (and especially western European). They are, furthermore, essentially Eurocentric, for they include few outside perspectives. The main values history education wants to emphasize are not related to patriotism but far more to western Enlightenment values such as individual rights, individual and collective freedom, equality, democratization and respect for human rights. The (sub)national past is almost completely absent from the history standards. No reference is made at all to Flemish history. Only one reference is made to the history of Belgium in the standards, requiring – in line with the way Belgian history is addressed within academia – that ‘students analyze the lines of fracture within the evolving Belgian society from 1830 onwards’ (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000) (1830 is the year in which Belgium became an independent state).

The standards approach history mostly in a ‘realistic’ way, assuming the ‘real’ and authentic past can be restored. The constructed and interpretative character of history is only implicitly touched upon. In general, the standards do not pay explicit attention to the need for epistemological reflection (Van Nieuwenhuysen *et al.*, 2016).

As young people in Flanders clearly encounter not one single narrative of the national past, but diverse and even conflicting narratives, the question arises as to which historical narratives they have in mind. The threefold aim of this paper is to examine (1) which narratives young people at the end of secondary school history education build about the national past, (2) whether they reflect on the fact that the national past can be narrated in different ways, and (3) to what extent they share common reference knowledge. In the context of the present study, reference knowledge is understood as factual knowledge of names, dates and places that spontaneously comes into students’ minds when asked to narrate their nation’s history. Individually, these single pieces of information hold little meaning, but together they constitute the building blocks of a historical narrative.

### **International research into historical narratives of the national past**

‘Narrative’ is a popular concept in various disciplines. In the wake of inspiring studies such as Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), many researchers – historians, educational scientists, (social) psychologists and others – have used it in their research. It has become clear that the narrative form is one of the most prominent ways to build an understanding of the world, including the nation. A useful theoretical framework has been developed by Wertsch (2004), who distinguishes between specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. While the former are stories that include specific information about places, dates and actors and involve chronology, temporal order and emplotment, the latter term refers to a narrative framework that is compatible with many instantiations in specific narratives. A template is a pattern, an abstract core idea or plot providing a structure that can underlie several different specific narratives, each of which has a particular setting. Templates are produced and disseminated in the complex interplay between historiography, politics and education. A dominant template is called a ‘master narrative’. Templates are cultural tools that configure how the past is represented and understood in people’s minds. Most often, templates are used ‘in a completely unreflective, unanalytical, unwitting and uncontested way’, Wertsch (2004: 57) and also other researchers

stress (Lopez *et al.*, 2014). In his own research, Wertsch examined specific narratives and the existence of templates in different countries. In Russia, for instance, he asked Russians to narrate the story of the course of the Second World War. Participants belonged to two generations; some had experienced the fall of communism in 1991 while others had not. Wertsch concluded that both generations told a narrative that was based on a template of 'victory over foreign powers', even though there were substantial differences in factual knowledge.

In recent years, research into the narrative representation of the national past by young people has been conducted in countries such as the Netherlands (Kropman *et al.*, 2015), Spain (Lopez *et al.*, 2014 and 2015), the United States (Epstein, 1998), Argentina (Carretero and Kriger, 2011; Carretero and Van Alphen, 2014), the United Kingdom (Hawkey and Prior, 2011; Lee and Howson, 2009), and Canada (Létourneau, 2014; Létourneau and Moisan, 2004; Peck, 2010; Peck *et al.*, 2011). In this research, as well as in that of Wertsch, the focus is mainly on the narrative structures, and not so much on the reference knowledge that complements young people's narratives. Only Kropman *et al.* (2015) and Peck *et al.* (2011) have analysed the reference knowledge in students' narratives. They recorded entities, dates and places.

Regarding narratives of the Belgian national past, two relevant studies have recently been published. In the first, the present authors identified the schematic narrative templates that underlie specific historical narratives about the Belgian past in contemporary Flemish historical culture (Van Havere *et al.*, 2015). To that end, we analysed academic work on the historiography and historical culture of Belgium, together with editorial comments, opinions and columns in contemporary newspapers, recent general overviews of Belgian history, and posts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. We ended up with a list of 13 templates that are currently used in Flanders (see Table 1). The exact number and delineation of these templates is, of course, open to debate. It is certainly possible to merge some of them into a more general template. Some of the 13 templates are conflicting, while others complement each other. Some templates embrace Belgium and its history, while others distance themselves from it, either in a scientific and detached or an emotional way.

**Table 1:** Thirteen schematic narrative templates about the history of Belgium

Template	Narrative
<b>Expressing affection for Belgium</b>	
Sleeping Beauty	A Belgian spirit existed long before 1830 and strove unceasingly for national independence.
Foreign Occupations	Before its independence, Belgium was occupied by a succession of foreign powers.
Battleground of Europe	Throughout history, Belgium has suffered passively as a result of the important European battles fought out on its soil.
Modern Country	After 1830, Belgium's vigour and prosperity were displayed through its industry, commerce and culture.
Small but Tough	Little Belgium always managed to actively resist foreign threats and to maintain some sort of national integrity.
Model Country	Belgium has always been an ambitious and progressive nation.
Microcosm of Europe	As a meeting place of North and South, Belgium can be considered a symbol and model for European diversity.
Absurdistan	Living in Belgium, one has to note the peculiar and even frustrating, but nonetheless pleasant, character of the country, with its seemingly endless problems and inconsistencies.

Template	Narrative
<b>Expressing rejection of Belgium</b>	
Artificial Country	There are no historical foundations to the Belgian nation. The country was created solely by other states in 1830 to safeguard the European balance of power.
Flemish	The centuries-old Flemish nation has long been oppressed and Belgium is the latest hindrance to the complete emancipation of Flanders.
Country of Scandals	Given numerous episodes, such as the colonization of Congo or its recent political problems, one can only be ashamed of Belgium and feel aversion towards it.
<b>Expressing scientific distance</b>	
Ironical	The history of Belgium consists of the accidental presences of ever-changing populations, which are only connected to each other because they live within the nation's present-day borders.
Lines of Fracture	Belgian society is marked by various lines of fracture.

An example of a template that embraces Belgium and its history is the 'Small but Tough' template in which the national past is approached as one of continuous and forceful resistance on the part of Belgians against foreign occupiers. This template can be fleshed out with concrete events, starting with the opposition of Ambiorix and his Gallic tribe to the legions of Julius Caesar, continuing through the brave resistance of 'poor little Belgium' and ending with the German occupation during the First World War or the armies of Adolf Hitler in the Second. The 'Flemish' template, by contrast, distances itself clearly from Belgium, and expresses emotional distance towards and rejection of present-day Belgium and its past. Belgium is considered the latest in a long row of occupiers of an unfree Flanders. However, distancing oneself from Belgium and its history does not necessarily involve emotional resentment; it can also be inspired by a scientific perspective, such as in the 'Lines of Fracture' template, which is referenced in the history standards. This template focuses on the ideological, socio-economic and communitarian/linguistic tensions that have characterized Belgian politics and social relations since the mid-nineteenth century.

A second relevant study has been conducted by Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wils (2015). This small-scale qualitative study examined what narratives young adults in Flanders construct about their national past, to what extent existing narrative templates underlie those narratives, and whether students' narratives are connected to their identification. Twelve first-year undergraduate university students were asked to complete a questionnaire and a performance task in which they were asked to select the 10 most significant events in the nation's history out of a set of 30. Afterwards, a group and individual interview took place in which students explained their selection. The results showed that no ingrained, nationally oriented master narrative dominated the students' thinking. Some students showed an awareness of the existence of two popular templates, namely the 'Small but Tough' and the 'Flemish' template, as mentioned above. Rather than relying on these in making a selection of important events, however, they turned them into objects of critical reflection. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that nine students adhered to a 'European Enlightenment' template. They narrated the national past as a story of progress towards freedom, equality and democracy, and hence developed a progressive, human rights-focused narrative that can be considered a European rather than a Belgian narrative. This narrative turned out to be closely connected to the students' supranational identification as Europeans or as citizens of the world.

## Research questions and methodology

Starting from the finding that young people in Flanders encounter in and outside school different and sometimes even conflicting representations of the national past, we set up a qualitative study examining which narratives students construct about the national past at the end of secondary education. To this end, we asked them to write an essay about the national past. We especially examined to what extent students' narratives are underpinned by existing narrative templates, and what historical reference knowledge they employ in building their narratives. Meanwhile, we also analysed whether students reflected in their essays on the fact that the national past can be narrated in different ways; in other words, we also examined whether students pay attention to the constructed and interpretative nature of (national) history.

The participants were 107 history students, between 17 and 19 years old, who had just started their first year of undergraduate study at the time of the study in September 2013. Of the students 42 were female and 65 male. All participants had completed their secondary education in a school in Flanders, which means that their secondary school history classes were based on a common set of history standards. We are aware that choosing history students means that the participants were probably particularly interested in the past and might have a better than average knowledge of history.

We opted for a writing assignment, using an open-ended question. The strength of this approach lies in the potential analytical richness of the narratives produced (Peck *et al.*, 2011). Having piloted the open-ended question on several occasions, we ended up with the following essay assignment: 'Compose an essay of one to three pages in which you describe, using full sentences, national history *as you know and see it*. Imagine your account serves as an introduction to a foreign friend, who does not know anything about this country but who is interested in a brief outline of its history. Provide your essay with a title.'

'Belgium' was not mentioned in this assignment, to avoid any steering of the participants' thinking about the national past, in terms of what 'national' means (Belgium or Flanders) and of the temporal starting point. As became clear during the pilots, a reference to Belgium could for instance have led them to start their essay at the Belgian Revolution of 1830. Therefore, we aimed to leave the phrasing of the assignment as open as possible.

The participants worked individually for 45 minutes on their essay, which they wrote on a computer in a computing lab without any preparation. During the writing assignment they were not permitted to use any external aids. The students had to elaborate a narrative of the national past on the spot, which allowed us to get a grasp of their reference knowledge and to what extent they spontaneously relied on a specific narrative template in building their historical narrative.

To analyse students' reference knowledge, we designed a coding scheme of categories of reference knowledge, such as entities (nations; individuals; collectives such as workers, farmers and soldiers; and corporate bodies, such as political parties or trade unions), dates and places (Carretero and Kriger, 2011; Kropman *et al.*, 2015; Peck *et al.*, 2011). These categories and subcategories were further refined during the first phase of our analysis. We coded using the qualitative research software QSR NVivo, which allowed us to record all reference knowledge mentioned in the essays. The choices made while coding were documented in a codebook, which the authors then discussed in order to achieve consensus regarding the exact coding. This guaranteed the consistency of the coding of all data from the first author onward. We chose as units of analysis 'utterances', defining an utterance as 'a phrase or a sentence that included a mention of a historical agent, or a pronoun referring to one' (Peck *et al.*, 2011: 262). One utterance could consist of consecutive sentences, if they continued to be about the same historical agent. This kind of coding made it possible to constantly stay close to the original essay.

At the same time the coding contributed to our analysis of students' use of one or more schematic narrative templates. Since students might address a protracted time period, starting well before 1830, we assumed that they could combine the use of two or more templates. To judge whether a student used a template we defined two criteria, of which at least one had to be met. When students articulated the core idea of a template (mentioned in Table 1), we considered this template to be present in the essay. In the case of the 'Foreign Occupations' template, for instance, students had to have mentioned that the Belgians were occupied by successive foreign powers for centuries. We also considered a template to be present when students mentioned at least two significant elements from the specific set of actors, dates, events and places that are closely connected to that template, even if they did not explicitly mention the core idea of the template. One student, for instance, stated that the 'young Belgians' did quite well during the nineteenth century. She cited two examples, namely the early construction of railways – Belgium having in 1835 constructed the first railway on the continent – and large-scale industrialization. We coded this essay with the 'Modern Country' template, since the examples she mentioned illustrate the way the new country showed its vigour and prosperity. Lastly, we also left open the possibility that other templates, not determined in previous research, might emerge from students' essays. Therefore, we subjected the essays to multiple analytical readings.

To determine whether or not students reflected on the constructive nature of historical narratives we conducted a close reading of the essays, searching for relevant passages in which students showed an awareness of the existence of templates, for instance, or critically deconstructed them.

## Results

### *Reference knowledge*

A first aspect of the analysis of the reference knowledge concerned the spatial dimension attributed to the national past in the essays. While no spatial dimension of the 'national past' was specified in the assignment, all 107 essays mentioned Belgium or the Belgians. Apparently, to the participating Flemish students, 'national history' clearly consists of 'Belgian' history. This does not mean that the country was presented as a unified or a homogeneous nation state by all students. The federal structure of Belgium, for instance, figured in 67 essays, mainly through references to Flemings (in 62 texts) or Walloons (in 48 texts). At the same time, Belgian history was always considered in a broader, European context. Except for one (short) essay, all students mentioned countries other than Belgium, especially the neighbouring countries. The Netherlands and Germany figured together in 82 essays, while 79 students spoke of France. The supranational European Union and/or its predecessors were mentioned in 33 essays.

Concerning the temporal dimension of 'national history', some three-quarters of all students (83 out of 107) included references in their essays to historical events and persons from before 1830 and referred to Belgium and Belgians even when they talked about pre-1830 events. By contrast, 24 students mentioned the 'Southern', 'Spanish' or 'Austrian' Netherlands, terms that are frequently used to refer to the time periods during which parts of present-day Belgium were under the rule of the Spaniards and the Austrians in the early modern period. In doing so, they demonstrated an awareness that using the term 'Belgium' before 1830 might be anachronistic. Furthermore, no more than 18 students explicitly reflected on the issue of where to start Belgian history. It hence seems as if a large majority considered 'Belgium' as a timeless, perpetual nation, which has existed since the middle ages or antiquity, or even as one existing since the creation of the earth, as one student wrote. This finding parallels earlier conclusions among



young people from researchers in other countries (Carretero and Kriger, 2011; Carretero and Van Alphen, 2014).

Although many essays also mentioned pre-1830 events, most students especially addressed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The events most mentioned were the First World War (82 times), the Second World War (78 times), the Belgian Revolution and subsequent independence (74 times) and the colonization of the Congo, linked to the figure of King Leopold II (57 times). All these events have a political character.

This political character is also reflected in the entities mentioned in the essays: when students referred to groups (collectives and/or corporate bodies), they mostly mentioned (substate- or micro-)national or political groups, such as Belgians, Flemings, Catholics or socialists. Socio-economic groups such as farmers or labourers were far less frequently mentioned. Another group hardly present in the essays were migrants. Only two students paid some attention to immigration and immigrants.

The essays featured 104 distinct persons mentioned by name. Of 66 other figures, only a descriptive function, such as 'king' (in 48 essays) or 'nun' (in a single essay), was given, without a name. The ten most frequently mentioned individuals included all seven Belgian kings; the other three were Julius Caesar (in 26 essays), Adolf Hitler (in 25 essays) and Napoleon Bonaparte (in 22 essays). As well as naming the Belgian kings, several students also used their reigns to structure their essay, with statements such as: 'In the reign of Baudouin, the population grew and the economy boomed'. Furthermore, of the 104 figures mentioned in the essays, only 14 were female. Of these, 13 were Belgian or foreign royal family members, with Queen Fabiola the most frequently mentioned (seven times). Beijing 2008 Olympic Games gold medal-winning high-jumper Tia Hellebaut was the only non-royal female to be named. She was mentioned only once, together with two successful Belgian sportsmen. Women in the national past appeared to exist only, to judge from the essays, thanks to a (royal) husband, father or other family member. In this respect, it needs to be mentioned that there was no substantial difference between the essays written by female and male students. This was the case not only for this specific part of the analysis, but also for all other parts (i.e. the use of templates and the extent of reflection on the nature of history). Thus it seems as though gender did not play a role in the use of reference knowledge or of templates, nor in the extent of deconstructive reflection.

### ***The use of schematic narrative templates***

As mentioned earlier, the elements of reference knowledge together constitute the building blocks of a historical narrative. The question we raise here is which templates underlie the selection and arrangement of reference knowledge. An analysis of the essays according to the criteria set out above resulted in the overview of 'traces' of templates seen in Table 2 on the following page.

Two templates appeared particularly frequently in the essays. The most popular was the 'Lines of Fracture' template. As explained above, this template, through which Belgian history is scientifically approached within academia, is the only one mentioned in the Flemish history standards. When the occurrence of this template is analysed in more depth, it turns out that the traditional lines of fracture, and within those most particularly the communitarian/linguistic fracture line, were most commonly mentioned; newer lines of fracture emerging after 1945, regarding ethical questions (such as abortion and euthanasia), environmental problems, public security and migration, were far less often addressed. The second most 'popular' template was 'Foreign Occupations'. The use of this template clearly resonated in the frequent reference to foreign conquerors occupying Belgian soil: Caesar, Napoleon and Hitler.

**Table 2:** Frequency of appearances of existing schematic narrative templates on Belgian history

Schematic narrative template	Appearances
Lines of Fracture	49
Foreign Occupations	47
Modern Country	22
European Enlightenment	18
Small but Tough	15
Artificial Country	9
Absurdistan	7
Flemish	6
Microcosm of Europe	5
Model Country	5
Country of Scandals	4
Battleground of Europe	4
Ironical	4
Sleeping Beauty	3

This overview of the frequency with which the distinct schematic narrative templates appeared, however, does not reveal in how *many* essays templates actually occurred, and *how* these templates were used within the essays. In ten essays, no templates resonated at all. Most of these used the reign of the successive Belgian kings to structure the narrative, and then addressed one or two key events of each reign. Although this might seem to constitute the application of a sort of ‘dynastic’ template, closer examination reveals that this is not the case. In these essays, the kings are in fact used solely as a way of structuring a bare enumeration of historical events, without any connection being made between them. These essays do not contain any emplotment. The presence and use of the kings as a structuring principle does not express any abstract core idea underlying a specific narrative, and does not function as a connecting thread between the events mentioned. Therefore, we did not consider this to be a template.

Of the 97 essays in which templates did occur, only 29 were generally structured according to one or two closely connected templates. Nine essays for example were centred on the ‘Foreign Occupations’, six around the ‘Lines of Fracture’, and two around the ‘Modern Country’ template. The other twelve essays consisted of coherent combinations of templates, such as the ‘Small but Tough’ template combined with the ‘Modern Country’ template. In both, Belgium’s history is attributed a glorious character. Contrary to what was found in our previous (small-scale) research, the ‘European Enlightenment’ template, approaching the national past as a story of progress towards freedom, equality and democracy, never underlay the whole narrative (Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wils, 2015). That no more than a quarter of all essays were structured by one or two closely connected templates seems to indicate that no ingrained specific master narrative was present in the minds of the vast majority of participating students.

This impression is confirmed when we look at those 68 essays in which templates did appear yet did not really support or structure the narrative. In these essays, a template cropped up in one or a few paragraphs but was followed by a paragraph in which a different, sometimes conflicting, template resonated. One student for instance used both the ‘Foreign Occupations’ template, which embraces Belgium and its history, and the ‘Flemish’ template, emotionally



rejecting Belgium and its history. He hailed the Flemish emancipation struggle and at the same time pleaded for Belgian unity, while in his conclusion stating that national history does not exist.

When we analysed the attitude towards Belgium and its history as expressed through the occurrence of certain templates in the 97 essays using them, we found that 60 essays testified to a unequivocal stance towards Belgium and its history. In 40 of these 60 essays, the students used only templates (one or more) that embrace Belgium and its history, 17 students used only templates testifying to a scientific distance from Belgium and its history, while in 3 of the 60 essays only templates that conveyed emotional distance resonated. Another 37 essays contained a combination of attitudes, mostly of templates expressing an embracing of Belgium and its history and templates expressing a scientific distance.

### ***Reflection on the existence of templates and the constructed and interpretative nature of history***

Research shows that templates are often used in ‘an unwitting and unreflective manner’ (Lopez *et al.*, 2014: 548). Our study confirms these findings to a large extent, as we found no instances of explicit or critical deconstruction of templates. This is not surprising, as the educational backgrounds of the participants did not encourage epistemological reflection on the ways in which the past is used to construct narratives. The essay assignment did not encourage the participants to make such thinking explicit either.

Four students did reject a certain template though. One student for instance wrote: ‘Geezers like England and France claim that Belgium is an artificial country. We only exist because in 1830, some powerful people decided we could become an independent state.’ Here she clearly referred to the ‘Artificial Country’ template. In the following sentences, she rejected this template on content-related grounds, criticizing the ‘pretentious thoughts’ of Belgium’s neighbouring countries. However, she did not deconstruct it, but simply replaced it with another one, the ‘Small but Tough’ template. In the essays of two other students, the same mechanism occurred. Only one student mentioned that the national past could be represented in different ways. “‘The’ history of the nation does not exist, because it is made by people,’ he argued, hence showing an awareness of the constructed nature of history. However, he did not elaborate on the existence of different templates or approaches in this respect.

While templates were not critically deconstructed, specific historical events and their popular representations were questioned in nine essays. Three students, for instance, referred to the diverging interpretations of the Battle of the Golden Spurs. On 11 July 1302, a Flemish infantry militia defeated a powerful army of French knights. While this event was commemorated in a Belgian context in the nineteenth century, it was later appropriated by the Flemish nationalist movement, resulting in the declaration in 1973 of 11 July as the national holiday of Flanders. Three students characterized this event as having been romanticized in order to foster a Belgian (and later on a Flemish) identity. The same applies to the famous remark of Julius Caesar that ‘the Belgians are the bravest of all the Gauls’. Six students exposed the use of this remark in nineteenth-century Belgium as an inappropriate re-use of an older history in a Belgian patriotic framework. All of these students, however, went on to use templates such as ‘Foreign Occupations’ in their essays. In other words, these students were able to deconstruct existing representations of a specific historical event but they were much less aware of their own reliance on popular narrative templates.

## Conclusion and discussion

This article examined the reference knowledge, the use of templates and the extent of epistemological reflection in written, narrative representations of the national past among 107 students who had just started their history studies at university. The students' reference knowledge reflected male, political and military approaches to the national past, and mostly drew from the past two centuries. This is not surprising: previous internationally comparative research has already shown that wars and recent history play a prominent role in students' representations of the past (Liu *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, an assignment about the *national* past might influence students' thinking towards a political approach.

The reference knowledge present in the essays clearly reflected the influence of both the secondary school history standards and popular historical culture. The history standards approach history within a western (European) framework. It is hence not surprising that many students considered episodes of the Belgian past in a European perspective. Earlier, similar research came to the same conclusion (Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils, 2015). Popular historical culture asserted itself in, among other things, the omnipresence of the Belgian kings in the essays. In Flemish secondary school history education, these kings are completely absent (the history standards) or only marginally present (the history textbooks). The extent, however, to which they are actually mentioned in concrete history classroom practice is unknown. In popular historical culture, in any case, a lot of attention is devoted to the Belgian kings, for instance in television documentaries, historical magazines and historical books meant for a broader 'lay' audience. Furthermore, the influence of primary education could have played an important role here as well. Although the standards for primary education also do not explicitly mention anything about the royal house, the primary school textbooks, and consequently probably many teachers as well, pay quite a lot of attention to the royal family; furthermore, they use the reigns of the Belgian kings to structure the Belgian past. It is therefore possible that the students also relied on this knowledge stemming from childhood in writing their essays (Raphael, 2004: 269–70).

The influence of both popular historical culture and the history standards was also reflected in the use of templates. The frequent occurrence of the 'Lines of Fracture' template echoes the only stipulation about the national past in the history standards. The 'Foreign Occupations' template on the other hand, the second most frequently used template, stems from nineteenth-century popular historical culture, in which it held a prominent position and even functioned as a master narrative. In current society, this template is still popular (Van Havere *et al.*, 2015).

Our analysis did not reveal in the students' essays the use of other templates than the 13 we determined in previous research. It is furthermore remarkable that the 'European Enlightenment' template, although occurring in 18 essays, was never used as a framework to structure students' overall narratives. This was the case in previous (small-scale) research (Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils, 2015), which, however, used a different methodology. This suggests that the research methodology has a considerable impact on the results in this kind of qualitative research into young people's historical narratives. Providing students with a series of important events from the national past (considered as building blocks of a narrative), from which they had to make a selection, led to different results from an assignment in which students had to write an essay completely on their own, without being provided with any building blocks.

In most students' essays, furthermore, it needs to be stressed that no ingrained nationally oriented master narrative was present. For most students, templates did not serve as a master narrative. When considered in a comparative international perspective this is exceptional, and might surprise (Carretero and Van Alphen, 2014; Wertsch, 2004). However, when taking the specific current history education and historical culture in Flanders into account, it ought not to.

Students' essays clearly reflected traces of the very complex, layered memory culture in Belgium and Flanders, in which many, even conflicting, interpretations coexist and no master narrative dominates the representation of the national past. At the same time, the essays reflected the absence of an autonomous Belgian history curriculum in Flemish schools.

Also absent from the essays were instances of explicit or critical deconstruction of templates. This too ought not to surprise, including in a comparative international perspective, not only because of the abovementioned reasons but also because templates are used in an unwitting manner anyhow (Lopez *et al.*, 2014; Wertsch, 2004). Nevertheless, it was remarkable that other traces of epistemological reflection could be found, given that, first, the history standards in Flanders do not pay much attention to epistemological issues, and second, the assignment did not explicitly ask for reflection. Despite this, some students did reflect on how episodes from the national past are used in patriotic or nationalist discourses. This can probably be partly explained by the specific character of history education within the Flemish community. Earlier research into history examinations has shown that history teachers in Flanders do pay some attention in their classes to the constructed nature of history, even though the history standards do not request this (Van Nieuwenhuyse *et al.*, 2016). It seems as if this, combined with a strong focus on critical thinking skills within the history standards, explains why some students were able to discern and criticize existing national or subnational 'myths' in the national past.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to reflect on how this capacity for critically deconstructing historical representations of single events could be cultivated towards the deconstruction of underlying narrative templates. This would at the same time contribute to developing students' critical thinking and their awareness of the existence of multiple perspectives. Such a transfer is certainly not easy to achieve. First of all, it requires the construction of a firm and coherent knowledge base concerning the national past. Second, one must not forget that templates are used in an unwitting and unreflective manner, including by teachers. History teachers and textbook authors should therefore be made aware of their existence. Third, strategies should be developed to deconstruct the existence of templates with students. Meaningful learning activities in this respect could for instance include diachronic comparative analyses of textbook accounts, in search for the underlying templates used by the authors. In the case of history education in Flanders, it would also be meaningful to critically corroborate specific narratives stemming from for instance popular historical culture, testifying of conflicting underlying templates. In the same way, it would be interesting to have students in the classroom compare their own specific narratives about the national past, and critically reflect about and deconstruct them.

### **Notes on the contributors**

Timo Van Havere is a PhD fellow at the Research Foundation – Flanders at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His current research focuses on the history of the 'culture of the archive' in Belgium between approximately 1750 and 1914. This interest has also led him to work on (past and current) uses and representations of the past.

Kaat Wils is professor in European cultural history and head of the Research Group Cultural History since 1750 at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Her research fields include contemporary historical culture, the history of history education and the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century scientific and intellectual culture.

Fien Depaepe has since 2013 been an assistant professor in educational sciences at the KU Leuven Centre for Instructional Psychology and Technology. Her research deals with cognitive (e.g. content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge)

and affective factors (e.g. beliefs and attitudes) that influence teaching and learning different disciplines. She is also member of the Interactive Technology research group ITEC (imec – KU Leuven).

Lieven Verschaffel obtained in 1984 the degree of Doctor in Educational Sciences at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Since 2000 he has been a full professor in educational sciences at the same university, with a main interest in educational psychology and more particularly in learning and teaching in specific domains such as mathematics, languages, history and music. He is a member of the editorial board of numerous international journals in the domain of learning and teaching.

Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse has since 2013 been assistant professor in History Didactics at the Faculty of Arts, University of Leuven, Belgium. His main research interests relating to history education are the position of the present, the use of sources, students' historical narratives and the connection with their identification, historical representations of the colonial past and the teaching of intercultural contacts.

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